

## Religion, Ethnicity and National Identity: An Analysis of the Islamic Experience in a Multi-Ethnic and Multi-Religious Malaysian Society

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**ABSTRACT:** *The main thrust of the paper is that religion plays an important role in the national identity of a Malaysian nation despite its multi-religious nature. The paper looks at the spectrum of the debate about the identification of Malaysia as an Islamic state and the opposition to this epitaph by some who feel that by the purpose of its permission of other religions, it will be wrong to describe it as an official Islamic nation, even though Islam is its officially recognized religion in the constitution. Thus, the paper concludes that despite the debate about its national identity, Malaysia has moved towards being identified as an Islamic nation (in fact, a model Islamic nation in the modern world), especially in the international community, which nonetheless takes adequate care of the interests of other religions by giving them the space to co-exist with it in a pluralistic, multi-ethnic and multi-religious state.*

**Keyword:** Religion, Islam, Ethnicity, National Identity, Malaysia, Colonization, Constitution

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### I. Introduction

Religion, ethnicity and national identity are very crucial in the contemporary time as many nations continue to witness wars and political unrest as a result of these issues. In South East Asia alone, the problem of religion, ethnicity and national identity have caused the displacement of the Rohingya people and brought war to Thailand and the Philippines with no end in sight. In Asia generally, it is presently dividing the Muslims in Syria and Lebanon whose people's quest for democracy has degenerated into sectarian war along religious, tribal and ethnic lines. In the

world, from Europe, Africa to the Americas – North and South – religion and ethnicity continues to play a big role on the national identity of the people and this has created a big gulf among people in their societies, especially in Africa where ethnic and religious crises are endless.

However, amidst all these divides along religious and ethnic lines in deciding the national identity of the people, Malaysia, a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation with Islam as the official religion, continues to enjoy peace and harmony and has become a shining example of an Islamic society with all the trappings of Madinah – the first

multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation of Islam built by the prophet Muhammad (s.a.w). Although, Islam is the official religion in Malaysia, other religions continue to be practiced in the nation in peace and without any hindrance and the people of different ethnicities continue to live with one another in peace and harmony.

The success of this multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation in uniting different peoples and religions is however not without its own difficulties and tensions. Compared to others, the Malaysian nation is far ahead in terms of religious and ethnic relations but nonetheless, there continues to be nervous moments and tension in the polity especially as it concerns Islam as the official religion and the Islamization program of the government.

In view of the above, this paper analyzes the role of Islam in the Malaysian nation and in building national identity in the Malaysian society – vis-à-vis Islam and other religions on the one hand, and the Malay ethnic nationality and other ethnic nationalities on the other. In order to properly carry out the aim and objective of this paper, it is divided into five parts ; i) the position of Islam in the Malaysian nation especially its place and role, ii) the relationship between religion and national identity in the Malaysian nation, iii) the concept of tolerance in Islam and its application in the Malaysian nation, iv) the view of the non-Muslims in the Malaysia nation concerning Islam as the official religion of the state and the program of the government on Islamization, and v) the conclusion of the paper on this issue.

## **II. Islam in Malaysia**

“The first political and social fact of life of Malaysia is and has been the relationship of religion and ethnicity” (Mehden, 1993, cited in Esposito and Voll, 1996:126). Given this statement, there are significant questions which beg for answers concerning the picture of a future Malaysia. How and in what way could religion (Islam) could possibly formulate homogeneity and unify the different ethnicities in Malaysia? To what extent would the perception of Malaysians towards Islamization influence the formation of national identity? These questions need to be examined with deep and incisive contemplation.

The uniqueness of Malaysia lies in its multi-ethnic and multi-religious structures. Based on the survey by the Department of Statistic on Malaysian Population and Housing Census in 2010, the total population of Malaysia was “28.3 million of which 91.8 per cent were Malaysian citizens and 8.2 per cent were non-citizens. Malaysian citizens consist of the ethnic groups named Bumiputera (67.4%), Chinese (24.6%), Indians (7.3%) and others (0.7%). Among the Malaysian citizens, the Malays were the predominant ethnic group in Peninsular Malaysia which constituted 63.1 per cent. The Ibans were constituted 30.3 per cent of the total citizens in Sarawak while Kadazan/Dusun made up 24.5 per cent of the total citizens in Sabah” (www.statistics.gov.my).

Islam is the official religion of the country and its identification as the official religion of the Federation has been preserved in article 3 by the 1957 constitution. At the same time, the

constitution also gives freedom for the practice of other religions in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation (Adil, 2007b; Esposito and Voll, 1996; Nagata, 1997).

Islam has had its special position in Malaysia since the era of Malay traditional kingdom in the fourteenth century. It served as the main code of governance and as a core element of Malay identity. This was evidently pointed out by Esposito and Voll (1996) in their argument that, “Traditionally in the Malay States, all aspects of government were, if not directly derived from religious sources and principles, cloaked with an aura of religious sanctity” (1996:125). One other related view on the significance of Islam as the state religion of Malaysia was put forward by Harding (1996) when he argues that, one of the main reason such provision has been included in the Federation Constitutions is to maintain social stability. Therefore, by considering these facts, one can argue that the guaranteed position of Islam in the Federal Constitution has impacted positively not only on the governmental system but also, Islam can be seen as an underlying factor in the formation of national identity in Malaysia despite the presence of other religions in the nation.

Interestingly, however, the question of whether Malaysia is an Islamic country or not, still remains polemic. In 1999, Dr Mahathir Mohamed the former Prime Minister made a declaration calling Malaysia an Islamic nation through the government’s promotion of the inculcation of Islamic values in Malaysian work ethics (Omar and Che Dan, 2006). Later, in 2004

former Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, in a rather bold declaration of Malaysia as an Islamic country launched and simultaneously made an official documentation of *Islam Hadhari*. Thus, echoing the fact that Islam plays an important role in the image of the nation.

But this announcement, some believe was not followed by any amendment to the Federal Constitution (Adil, 2007a) which is necessary for the country to truly bear this image of an Islamic nation. However, for both Omar and Che Dan (2006), they believe that such national declarations, even though not explicitly stated in the constitution, have influenced many Malaysian policies through the implementation of Islamic principles which are intended to improve Malaysian society as a whole (particularly Malay-Muslim community) in its quest to develop into a progressive nation. Reflecting on this view, one can generally highlight that Malaysia is going one step further to forming its new Islamic identity in facing the challenge of globalization and nation building. Nonetheless, in this sense, even though Malaysia seemingly has a space to make transformation or change its current position, it still has to face the reality of its socio-political structure as a multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation.

Meanwhile, contrary to the assertions of the two former Prime Ministers above, since the time of Tunku Abdul Rahman, who was the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, the formation of an Islamic identity for this country was never affirmed. The Tunku visions Malaysia as a secular country as he postulated that “in a previous

statement I made on religion I mentioned that this country is a secular state. It means that it is not a Muslim state. Islam is the official religion of this country, but other religions have a right to play their part as far as religion is concerned” and “A Muslim state for Malaysia is definitely out of the question, though the Muslims would like to see this happen. We have to consider other races who have helped the country to achieve independence” (Rahman, 1986, cited in Abdullah, 1998:208).

The first Prime Minister of Malaysia does not stand alone on this position, as Neo (2006) has put forth a similar argument. He claims that Article 3 in the constitution would only be practiced as a Muslim personal and customary laws, whereas, the non-Malays have received assurances that the character of the nation would be multi-ethnic and secular. However, this statement is doubtful because, although he holds that the designation of Islam as the official religion has been understood by the three parties who were involved in the constitutional bargain to be only of symbolic effect, but, Aziz Bari (2000) points out that as a religion of the Federation, the provision in Article 12(2), that allows the use of official funding to promote and facilitate Islamic institutions, proves that Islam has a special position which is superior to any other religions in the Federation and is not merely symbolic as Neo (2006) says.

Another argument that stresses that Malaysia is not an Islamic state was put forward by Nagata (1997). According to her, although Islam is the official religion in Malaysia, it still cannot be fully accepted that it is an Islamic nation. Her view is

based on the Malaysian jurisdiction law system in which the Federal constitution provides for a dual system of civil and religious (*Shariah*) courts. Civil courts have general jurisdiction over all civil and criminal matters while *Shariah* courts only apply *shariah* law to Muslims personal issues (Neo, 2006). Nagata argues that in the event that the jurisdiction or decision of the two parallel sets of legal courts, secular and *shariah*, conflict, the latter shall be subordinated to the former, and all must be consistent with Federal law and with the constitution (Jusoh, 1991, cited in Nagata, 1997:135). In other words, this shows that the common law and constitution are superior to the Islamic law in the nation and this therefore affirms the secular nature of the nation which necessary strips it of the epitaph of an Islamic nation.

But, in contrast to the above, Hamayotsu (2003) argues that although the jurisdiction of *shariah* courts still remains restricted to matters concerning Malays personal laws, the amendment of the federal constitution in 1988 which added Article 121(1A) to ensure that decisions made within the jurisdiction of *shariah* courts could not be reserved by the civil courts has given more jurisdictional leverage to the *shariah* courts. As such, to refute those arguments that indicate that Malaysia is a secular state, Aziz Bari (2000) holds that compared to the Indian constitution which clearly states that the country is a secular state; the Malaysian Federal constitution is soundless on this matter. Thus, he posits, Malaysia is not a secular state *per se*. Hence, according to Shad Faruqi, “Malaysia is neither a full-fledged Islamic state nor

wholly secular”, but “in view of the fact that Muslims constitute the majority of the population, and Islamization is being vigorously enforced, Malaysia can indeed be described as an Islamic or Muslim country” (Adil, 2007:13-14). In addition to his previous statement, Adil says that there is no such conclusive word in the federal constitution or historical evidence to show that the country was meant to be a secular state (1997:14).

From all these polemics, it can be argued that Malaysia tries to balance between the secular and Islamic. It gives opportunity to apply Islamic values in the regime system and on the other side gives freedom to other believers to practice their own religion. Therefore, it is safe to say Malaysia is a country which revolves between the secular and Islamic system. Besides, it also depends, to a large extent, on who is in control of the regime and what kind of aim the regime intends to pursue in its mode of governance. Having said this, as far as this contentious issue is concerned, there is a very important fact that cannot be denied as pointed out by Nagata, which is that “it is also constitutionally required that the Prime Minister be a Malay, as is also true of the chief ministers of the individual states” (Nagata, 1997:134). Thus, as long as the constitution, as the supreme law, is been followed, the vagueness and contentious nature of this issue will slowly subside because it is bound to be apparent that Islam takes precedent in everything in the nation – including in deciding the leaders of the nation as it will be seen in the discussion below.

### **III. The relationship between religion and national identity**

Religion and identity have a very strong relationship. Both have deep structures and both may feed upon each other. Religion not only has the ability to shape the form of individual identity but also has the capability to construct the national identity of a nation state. Putting this in perspective, Safran argues that, “it was religion that was at the root of collective identity and that provided the foundation of the state” (Safran, 2008:171). In other words, religions have preceded the nation-state; have served as the basis of the collective awareness of the nation and the foundation of sovereignty. They have been a major institutional support of the state.

Safran avers that in many cases, religion has been the bedrock of nation-building and, even today; it is difficult to separate a number of national identities from their religious matrices. For instance it is hard to separate Greek, Hindu, Israeli, Pakistani, Polish, Sikh, and Tibetan national identities from their respective religions. Subsequent from this perspective, it can be suggested that for a country like Malaysia, Islam as the official religion with more than 60 per cent believers of the citizens, it is not impossible to bring up Islam as a fundamental of national identity. When one talks about the relationship between religion and national identity in Malaysia, the issue of ethnicity will automatically emerged. Ethnicity has salient influence on the notion of Malaysian national identity and until now it is still an issue of debate. This debate about ethnicity began when “Tanah Melayu” (Malay Land) achieved independence in

1957 from the British colonial master where the population was already multi-ethnic. The concept of ethnicity or race had never been in existence before colonization as all citizens were “*rakyat raja*” (king’s citizens) and they had to give their loyalty to the king. According to Mauzy (1999:47), before British colonial rule was established in the late nineteenth century, the Malay Peninsula (Tanah Melayu) was an under populated and relatively ethnically homogeneous area controlled by a number of Malay rulers and powerful chiefs residing in reasonably well-defined territorial units. This shows that colonization altered the original identity of Malay Land leading consequently to the national identity confusion presently.

However, even though British colonial master did change a lot of Malay Land original structure particularly in the administrative system which eroded the power of the *Sultans* (Malay kings), British still acknowledged the significance of Islam and Malay custom by not interfering in both matters. As highlighted by Case (2002), British mediated prominently and specifically in appointing residents and advisors to *Sultans* in order to administer the Malay community leaving out issues of religion and custom because the constitution clearly states that Islamic affairs and Malay customs are under the different *Sultans’* jurisdiction.

In the contemporary time, however, Malaysia is practicing a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy with constitutional monarchy on the British pattern (Haneef, 2001). The monarchy system remained in the Malaysian regime system as a symbol of the sovereignty of the state. In relation to

both Islam and constitutional monarchy, Malaysia is the only country in the world to have an elected king and he must be a Muslim king. With this unique feature, Bakar (1991) states that the reigning *sultans* of its nine federating states have to elect a king among themselves (*Yang di-Pertuan Agong*) every five years. The *Agong* is the Head of State and Head of Islam for the whole nation and have the right to determine ‘the extension of any (Islamic) religious acts, observances or ceremonies to the Federation as a whole’. Generally speaking, this high standard of monarchy system not just articulates the uniqueness of the country but also the image and the national identity of the nation.

Apparently Islam has become a visible symbol in Malaysian politics. Bakar (1991) argues that the state had already acquired certain notable Islamic characteristics at the time of its birth. More so now that Islam has become its dominant national character. Grounded on this argument, it is clearly seen that subsequent governments, and the current government, have put Islam as a bench-mark to the formation of the image of Malaysia. Therefore, these governments significantly expanded their involvement in Islamic affairs in an attempt to strengthen the Islamic characteristic of the nation.

Here are some examples of what one may consider evidences of government efforts at the Islamization of the country’s image: provision of greater support for expanded coverage of Islam in the media and in school curriculum; establishment of an International Islamic University (IIUM), as well as Islamic studies faculties in various



existing universities; creation of an Islamic bank and insurance company (*takaful*); sponsorship of musabaqah al-Quran, (Quranic recitation competition); increased funding for the building of mosques, for social welfare programs and for propagation (*dakwah*) of Islam; establishment of the Institute for Islamic Understanding (IKIM in its Malay acronym), *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (JAKIM), creation of public funded pilgrim's saving fund (*Tabung Haji*) and by convening international Islamic conferences on everything from Islamic philosophy and law to economics and sciences (Nagata, 1997, Esposito and Voll, 1996, Roff, 1998).

However, Esposito and Voll (1996), see all these efforts in political terms. They believe that all these hallmarks that emerged from the government efforts derived from the hidden intention to prevent the strengthening of the opposition, The Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS), whose campaign slogan is Islam and the entrenchment of Islamic values in the society. PAS tend towards making the country a purely Islamic country. In other words, in the opinion of Esposito and Voll (1996), the government contribution towards developing Islam in Malaysia is more to preserve the power of the ruling party rather than building 100 per cent pure Islamic country or a nation with Islamic identity.

Looking at this argument above, it seems that both Esposito and Voll (1996) did not take cognizance of the structure of the Malaysian society which is multi-religious, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic as inherited from the British era, thus the ruling government could not drastically change

Malaysia to a full fledged Islamic country. That is why even though the government gives extra attention to developing and entrenching Islam, yet it also give equal opportunity to the other believers to practice their religions and cultures. This is why, as Daniels (2005) points out, the Malaysian government has promoted interracial and inter-religious participation in festivities (namely Aidilfitri, Chinese New Year, Deepavali, and Christmas) and 'open house' visiting as a means to develop and enhance social solidarity amongst Malaysia's diverse population.

With regards to Islam as a benchmark to the formation of Malaysian image and national identity, Ng Kam Weng (*The Star* 25 Aug, 2006) writes that Islam as the official religion may be considered as the religion to be a *modus operandi* for defining Malaysian identity and that Islam is capable of addressing the socio-political, economic, and racial issues of a multi-cultural nation. Similarly, Nagata (1997:140) expresses the view that the declaration of Islam as the official religion in the federal constitution is seen as a positive force for the kind of ethno-nationalism that gives Malaysia its distinctive character. Unfortunately, Nagata does not give enough insight into how and in what way Islam could formulate the identity of Malaysia. Therefore, there is a need to explore how Islamic revivalism and perception of Islamization relate to the formation of Malaysia national identity.

#### **IV. Tolerance in Islam**

As discussed above, Islam is enshrined in the federal constitution, the highest law in the land, as the sole official religion. This constitutional provision makes Islam the

supreme religion. Yet, notwithstanding its supremacy status, Islam did not restrict inter-religious coexistence. This obviously can be seen from Sing (2001) who argues that religious tolerance is generally well entrenched in Malaysia compared to many other religious-pluralist societies. A rather concrete argument that relate to this scenario is from Esposito and Voll (1996). They argued that even though Malaysia is under Malay-Muslim political dominance, there is no big conflict among the citizens that could cause riotous or violent opposition. The coalition parties can accept the dominant ruling party and political participation of Islamic groups and Islamic organizations.

Based on these views, one can infer that the virtues of tolerance in Islam can be one of the core values in attempting to formulate a solid national identity in Malaysia. It not only plays an influential role in building the foundation of national identity, religious tolerance can also be the main channel in achieving unity and political stability. Quoting the ex-Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who says that *"it is important for the citizens of this country to realize that tolerance of other religions goes beyond mere co-existence"*. Tolerance, hence, should translate into the act of *"engaging with one another, creating and sustaining an open dialogue and building permanent bridges of cooperation through mutual participation"* (New Straits Times, 4/8/04 cited in Goran Collaste, 2005). In this vein, it is important to note that the Qur'an as the sacred source in Islam itself has shown that this religion denounces of forcing mankind to accept it, hence the

statement; "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (Sura Al-Baqara, 256).

From all the above, it is fair to say that Islam in Malaysia is an underlying factor of the nation's identity and it is not just a source of pride but also a political and developmental force that would define the future of Malaysia. Furthermore, Islam is also seen as being compatible with modernization and globalization and this was evidently clear under the Premiership of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and his government. Islam was portrayed as a faith and a way of life that can inform modernization and development: a system of values that encourages and supports reason, science and technology; and as a strong work ethic, as well as racial and religious tolerance and harmony (Esposito and Voll, 1996:144). From this premise, it is clear that the challenges of modernity and globalization did not weaken the potentials of Malaysia with its Islamic values to put itself in the eyes of the world. As Nagata argues, Islam in Malaysia has become a "conduit" to a host of other religious organizations and interest groups outside Malaysia (Nagata, 1997:130).

In relation to this view above, Esposito and Voll (1996) point out that the Malaysian government has become more visible in its participation in international Islamic organizations such as the Asia Pacific Mosque Council and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). On the whole, in speaking about Islam as the foundation and source of identity and political framework of the country, it is equally important to note that religion can potentially deflects the loyalties



of citizens to the control of international networks, thus, it is a force to be treated with care, requiring domestication to the needs of the state.

Thus, in recognition of the above and in the attempt to prevail on the sense of loyalty among the citizens, particularly the Muslims, to the nation, the Malaysian government introduced and implemented its own program of Islamization which is domestic to the nation. A major part of this program involves public media campaigns and the introduction of specific religious activities and strategies through national channel broadcast. Radio and Television Malaysia (RTM) has been a potent force which did most of the broadcast mainly on TV1 (Roff, 1998). The programs channelled in on the aspects of Muslims' life for instance Qur'an readings and *du'a'* to open and close the day's broadcasting; *adhan* (calls to prayer) at the fixed prayer times; daily *hadith* broadcasting; daily *hadith* presentations; magazine, discussion, and 'advice' programs; and regular news of government Islamic activities (entitled 'From the Pusat Islam'). International Islamic events of great consequence were well represented, including rebroadcasts of, for example, *hajj* proceedings from Saudi Arabia (Roff, 1998:227).

Furthermore, Roff states that *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (JAKIM) or the Department of Islamic Development, is seen as strengthening the role of Islam in Malaysia by reinforcing the *dakwah* (Islamic call). All these scenarios illustrate some form of collective identity of Muslims in Malaysia in contrast to others.

Apart from that, Nagata argues that Institute for Islamic Understanding (IKIM) one of the most established Islamic institutions in Malaysia also has task to persuade non-Muslims and foreign investors that Malaysia's Islam is far from the fanatical and fundamentalist variety found in the Middle East or North Africa, and that Malaysia is a progressive country, not to be confused with more backward Muslim regimes elsewhere (Nagata, 1997:141). For Esposito and Voll (1996), IKIM also has the additional benefit of both emphasizing Islamic identity and distancing the government from Western values. Moreover, to make sure that there is no bias message on Islam or misinterpretation, the government introduced two main media channels "Suara Islam (Voice of Islam) and "Islam Vision" TV Service (Nagata, 1997:142). Such composite views, has shown that Malaysia has intention to put itself in the world platform in order to have recognition and esteem.

#### **V. The non-Muslims reaction**

Although the government has continued to emphasize religious plurality and has not imposed a single system of religion, the non-Muslims remained nervous and feel uneasy about the implications of such trend. As pointed out by Neo (2006) in her article, *Malay Nationalism, Islamic Supremacy and the Constitutional Bargain in the Multi-ethnic Composition of Malaysia*, the Chinese are concerned about this movement towards Islamic supremacy which they feel threatens their rights as citizens in the country. However, Esposito and Voll stress that provisions safeguarding the use and practicing of other religions were also

included in the Constitution, “Non-Muslims had right to practice their religion, own property, establish religious school, manage their own affair, and be governed in private matters by their religious laws and institutions” (Esposito and Voll, 1996: 126), and therefore, there is no need for alarm by the non-Muslims as their interests have been adequately safeguarded and taken care of.

Whilst Guan (2000), argue that the process of Islamization in Malaysia will erode the right of non-Muslim culture to be in the public space, Yousif (2004) indicates that there are many rituals and festivals such as *Thaipusam* (including Dragon Dance), which went out of vogue for the past twenty years but are back in trend in Malaysia today which shows that non-Muslim cultures are now thriving in the increasingly Islamic environment. Protests and complains also come from the non-Muslim institutions for instance Malaysia Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS) about the disadvantage of Islamization for Hindus and other non-Muslim religions especially concerning the animosity towards the building of shrines and temples for their worship (Hutter, 2004).

Once again this allegation of animosity and fear of Islamization have been denied by Yousif (2004) who argues that the establishment of MCCBCHS itself shows that the ruling government gives opportunity to the non-Muslim to have greater say in the policy-making process. Moreover, in Kelantan which is being ruled by PAS, a purely Islamic party, for the last 24 years, a number of Buddhist temples or Wats have been built without any problem and they

attract a large number of devotees on *Wesak Day*, a Buddhist festival. The Islamic state also boasts of having one of the most magnificent statues of Sitting Buddha which is said to be the second largest of its kind in Southeast Asia. In sum, the openness and readiness of the Malay-Muslim government to accept and share political positions with other non-Muslims has shown that Islamic value does not deny other religions and their practitioners their rights but on the other hand, it gives them the opportunity to coexist with it in a peaceful and harmonious manner of mutual respect and mutual benefit and progress.

## VI. Conclusion

From the discussion above, it is clear that Islam to a very large extent has shaped the national identity of Malaysia and Malaysians, especially the Malays who are ethnically Muslims. While, at the same time it allows the other religions in the nation the necessary space for their continued relevance and practice by the other ethnic nationalities in the nation.

Although one can concur that it is very difficult to give Malaysia the epitaph of an Islamic nation off hand, but looking at the degree of the arguments above, it is equally hard to say that it is a secular nation like any other one. However, it will not be far off to say that the nation is a predominantly Islamic nation judging by the degree of the process of Islamization that has taken place and presently on-going in the nation. Moreover, the place of Islam as guaranteed in the constitution and in the political leadership of the nation paints it as a nation that tilts toward Islam. The

formation of the nation, historically, socially and politically and its population which is also predominantly Muslim portrays it as a nation with all the trappings of Islam which is apparent to everyone in the socio-cultural milieu of the nation. The active involvement of the nation in international Islamic affairs also paints the nation as Islamic to the outside world and its exemplary development and progress which incorporates Islamic values no less gives it the logo of a model Islamic nation in the international arena. Thus, even though it may not yet be accepted by some within the nation as a full-fledged Islamic nation, it nonetheless portray this to many and has been accepted as such in the international circle.

In the same vein, its ability to manage its multi-ethnic and multi-religious populace despite the fact that Islam is enshrined in the constitution as the official religion and the majority of its populace are Muslims have earned it a place of pride in the comity of nations and serves as a modern exemplar of the pristine cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic and multi-religious Madinah state established by the prophet of Islam after his migration to Yathrib, which was later renamed Al-Madinah Al-Munawwarah by the prophet.

The experience of Malaysia on the issue of religion, ethnicity and national identity has shown that Islam, when properly harnessed and channelled in the right direction do tolerate, and can tolerate in the contemporary modern globalized world, a pluralistic society and religion and likewise properly takes care of the rights and interests of the minorities in such a society.

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